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**Paper Title**

Stay with the Programme: Describing the evolving Retention Strategy of AIT's Faculty of Business & Hospitality.

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**Abstract**

Alarmed by high levels of first year student attrition (28.5%) and non-progression rates of over 30% on five of the school's first year programmes, in the academic year 2012-13 the new management team of the AIT Faculty of Business & Hospitality undertook to interview every first year student who failed any module from their semester 1 sitting. Following on from what was often a brutally honest set of exchanges it emerged that students who had, the previous year, averaged two and half to three hours study daily, were now devoting less than half an hour daily to their studies.

The Faculty Management response, supported and delivered by all the academic staff in the school, was to promote a "habit-forming" initiative to be engaged in by every first year student at the start of the 2013-14 academic year. This initiative required students to start working from their very first day in the AIT Faculty of Business & Hospitality. In order to enhance student engagement, the traditional induction format was augmented by giving every student an assignment to be completed within two weeks. Any student failing this assignment, or not submitting, was immediately called to a meeting with their Head of Department.

The initial results varied between programmes. One programme returned the best set of student results in the programme's history. Another programme had students leave, due to increased stress levels, associated with the initial assignment. Across the school, the statistics were encouraging, showing an

increase in the number of students attempting their exams. The overall pass rate improved. The major statistical improvement was seen in a reduction in the non-progression rate to 2<sup>nd</sup> year by 13.7% the following year 2013-14. This result was maintained in 2014-15.

Overall the "habit-forming" initiative was deemed successful in increasing levels of student engagement and through improved progression rates. The model was further enhanced for the 2014-15 academic year to include additional supports for the first years with their first assignment. A further measure incorporated their second assignment being announced in advance of their first assignment deadline. Further revisions have been implemented during the current and ongoing programmatic review to ensure every student has an assignment at all times and every semester requires them to work from the outset.

Students who traditionally are not strong enough to attend university but attend institutions like AIT Faculty of Business & Hospitality might need to be given a more challenging introduction to their life as a third level student. Easing the student transition by getting students into the habit of working consistently is a vital ingredient that will contribute to their success.

**Keyword:** Student Transition; Progression, Student Engagement, Habit-Forming

## **Introduction to the AIT Faculty of Business & Hospitality**

The Faculty offers a range of programmes across three Departments - Accounting & Business Computing, Business Studies, and Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure. The latter department was only added to the Faculty in 2014-15, hence its programmes are excluded from the study.

There are approximately 1,600 students in the faculty, pursuing programmes across levels 6-9. The total number of year 1 students in the two departments covered by this study was in the range 200-250.

### **The Problem**

During 2012-13 academic year, faculty management began to focus more on the non-progression rate from year 1 to year 2. It became very clear that the 28.5% average non-progression rate, whilst not unusual for the sector as a whole, represented a lost opportunity for many students and indeed the faculty.

It is important to note that non-progression is measured from 31 March in the first year of study to 31 March the following year. Hence any student who was registered on 31 March on year 1, but was not registered on year 2 of that programme on 31 March the following year, was deemed to be non-progressing.

This eliminated the effect of the normal drop-off in early semester 1 from students realising they were on the wrong programme and other reasons that lead to initial registrations subsequently becoming withdrawals.

### **Response by the Management Team – the genesis of the “habit-forming” initiative**

An analysis was undertaken regarding the cause of non-progression.

The Heads of Department undertook to interview every first year student who failed any module from their semester 1 examination sitting. This was communicated to the students in October of 2012-13. In truth, the primary purpose of meeting the students was to act as a deterrent in its own right: Fail an exam and you will have to meet the Head of Department! The Heads of

Department agreed to provide a clear message centred on the concept of failure as being unacceptable and an increase in student effort was required.

An unintended consequence of the student meetings was the priceless information that came back from the students. Almost all of them were brutally honest. They had come to college full of enthusiasm, ready to work hard and do well. They found that when their first assignment came up at week 7 that they found it hard to respond. Students who were in the habit of averaging two and half to three hours study daily, the previous year, when they attended their final year of second level were now devoting less than half an hour daily to their studies. It seemed that they had failed to develop, or lost already developed study habits in college.

The challenge was immediately clear. The Faculty of Business & Hospitality needed to consider how students were being allowed to establish bad habits from the outset. Natural student enthusiasm at the commencement of programmes was not being followed through to enable all students to flourish. Change was necessary if the situation was to be improved both in relation to student performance and progression rates.

The faculty's response, supported and delivered by all the academic staff in the faculty was to promote a "habit-forming" initiative for every first year student at the start of the 2013-14 academic year. This "habit-forming" initiative required students to start working from their very first day in the AIT Faculty of Business & Hospitality. In order to enhance student engagement, the traditional induction format was changed to allow every student receive their first assignment.

This first assignment sought to achieve two main aims: Firstly, it was not difficult for the average student to deliver a satisfactory assignment. The resulting success would, it was expected, promote confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Secondly, it was designed to be reasonably time consuming, enhancing the student expectation that time allocated to coursework was essential. Students were told that their attendance in other subjects was part of the marking scheme for the assignment.

As a follow-up, any student not submitting the assignment, or failing to achieve a passing grade, was called to an interview with their Head of Department.

This was designed to press the point that the faculty took the initiative very seriously. The more important effect was that students took it seriously. Non-submission rates were 5-6% in the first year, and virtually zero in the second year of the initiative. Anecdotal evidence from academic staff was that engagement had definitely improved as a result.

### **Theory on transition to independent learning**

The holy grail of Higher Education is the development of independent or self-directed learning skills by students over the duration of their studies. Within an Irish context discussions on independent learning are framed in the level of preparedness of the Leaving Certificate student for the demands of Higher Education. Most would contend that the Leaving Certificate and independent learning are on opposite ends of the spectrum. The transition from post primary to higher education is among the most challenging that student will undertake on their educational journey.

The challenge arises from a range of factors. How higher education institutions (HEIs) support students in this journey is one of the key determinants of their success or otherwise. Some students struggle to implement the concepts of self-directed and independent learning that are required for success in higher education. Many commentators on Higher Education in Ireland lay the issue at the door of the leaving certificate examination and the backwash effect of what is called the points race with a focus on the high stake terminal examinations. It is commonly argued that the initial student experience is pivotal in establishing attitudes, expectations, motivation and approaches to learning (Kantanis 2000).

The first year student experience is multifaceted and multidimensional and covers a broad range of areas including but not limited to induction, programme choice, academic staff, student engagement, pastoral care, access to support services, library, tutors and friendships developed. Research on the first-year student experience provides a critical insight into the wider issues of student engagement, development and retention (Kantanis 2000; McInnes, James, and Hartley 2000).

Entering university is a time of great stress for students, including those who are successful (Greenbank 2007; Wintre and Yaffe 2000). Some view it as a challenge, others are overwhelmed by the change and do not cope well. Large numbers of students (up to 40% at some institutions) do not complete, often due to the difference between the expectations of university life and the actual experience (Gerdes and Mallinckrodt 1994; Rickinson and Rutherford 1995, 1996; Wintre and Yaffe 2000). As students transition from the support frameworks of schools, they commonly find it difficult to manage the level of autonomy and flexibility, which comes as part of the higher education environment. Wintre and Yaffe (2000) suggest that the reality of students' experiences at university is harsher and more stressful than most students expect. The university environment, in particular the difference between university and school, is the main challenge. New found independence also plays a part, with loneliness, home-sickness and difficulties keeping up with academic work being major factors (Rice 1992; Wintre and Yaffe 2000).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first year has been identified as the period in which the greatest amount of academic failure and attrition from study occurs (Hillman 2005; McInnes, James, and Hartley 2000). In the view of some researchers e.g. Tinto (1988), completion of the first year is 'more than half the battle' in progression to degree completion. The processes by which young people come to identify with, and become members of, a study community have been likened to those by which individuals progress from youth to full adult status in traditional societies (Hillman 2005). These processes involve separation, transition and finally incorporation into a new group (Hillman 2005). It is during these first two stages –separation and transition – that the first-year tertiary student may be at greatest risk of failure (Tinto 1988). Overall, the literature highlights the need for effective facilitation and support from HEIs to assist first-year student transition.

**Habit Forming - a big piece of a larger jigsaw**

## **The Assignment**

A considerable advantage that the Faculty of Business & Hospitality had was that every first year student had to take a module entitled "Learning and Development for Higher Education". This module became the conduit to distribute the assignment and support the student in its preparation and delivery. The assignment itself was an individual task to conduct a SWOT analysis on the company of the student's choice. Assignments had to be submitted two weeks after they were issued. The assignment sought to achieve two main aims: Firstly, it was not difficult for the average student to succeed. Such success would promote confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Secondly, it was designed to be time consuming; supporting a student expectation that time allocated to coursework was essential. Students were told that their attendance in other subjects was part of the marking scheme for the assignment, to alleviate fears that students would neglect other modules. Crucially, the academic staff members involved committed to marking the assignments within one week and sending the results to the Heads of Department. Once collated any student who failed or did not submit was invited to a meeting with the Head of Department.

## **Habit Forming - a big piece of a larger jigsaw**

It is important to note that the faculty management team believed that the "habit forming" initiative was only one, albeit crucial, element to a more comprehensive and evolving student retention model. Other complementary initiatives were taken. One of these initiatives involved inviting parents of first year students into the AIT Faculty of Business & Hospitality at the start of first year. At this meeting they were given some feedback on how the faculty operates, how to read programme schedules, when to expect exam results and other relevant matters. The objective was to support the parents to support their students. Many parents had not been to college themselves, and had no clear idea how the systems worked.

A further measure was the introduction of briefing sessions for students who failed modules in any exam sitting. The purpose of such sittings was twofold: Firstly, students got to see that there were many of their fellow students who had also failed which gave them a sense of encouragement that they were not

alone when they had failed. Secondly it allowed the faculty the opportunity to remind students that they could succeed despite a setback and remind them of the supports that existed in the form of tutors.

Meetings between the students and the Heads of Department have also remained on the school calendar. The first meetings occur in week 4 following the publication of results from the LDHE assignment. The second are scheduled in February when semester 1 results are issued. All correspondence is sent to the students' home addresses.

### **Results from Habit-forming Initiative**

The initial results varied between programmes. One programme returned the best set of student results in the programme's history. Another programme had students leave, due to increased stress levels associated with the initial assignment. Across the school, the statistics were encouraging showing an increase in the number of students attempting their exams, as well as a decrease in the number of modules failed. The overall pass rate improved. The major statistical improvement was seen by the non-progression rate in the numbers that progressed to 2<sup>nd</sup> year reducing by 13.7%, after the repeat exams in the autumn.

The following table shows the non-progression statistics by programme and by year. The results for 2013-14 and 2014-15 are compared to the average for the 5-year period 2008-13.

This is a crude analysis, and does not take account of many other factors that affect non-progression rates. It also fails to recognise improvements that are not revealed by the non-progression rates, such as improved retention to 31 March in first year, improved exam attempt rates, and reduced number of modules failed by students not progressing. All of these were observed but are outside the scope of this paper. Simple averages and weighted averages are shown for comparison. Also to aid comparison, programmes running throughout the comparison period are shown separately from those commencing or ceasing in that period.



**Table 1: Non-progression rates by programme compared to 2008-13 base period**

Programme	Average Non-Progression Rate 2008-09 to 2012-13		Non-Progression Rate in 2013-14	Non-Progression Rate in 2014-15	Note
	Simple average	Weighted average (by student numbers)			
<b>Programmes active throughout the review period</b>					
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Accounting	26%	27%	17%	23%	
Bachelor of Business (Honours)	25%	24%	12%	11%	
Higher Certificate in Business in Office Management	27%	29%	6%	12%	
Higher Certificate in Business in Equine Studies	16%	16%	14%	14%	
Higher Certificate in Business	30%	29%	29%	21%	
Higher Certificate in Business in Music and Instrument Technology	36%	35%	29%	31%	
Bachelor of Business and Law (Honours)	29%	30%	38%	38%	
Bachelor of Science in Business Computing	40%	40%	57%	25%	
<b>Average non-progression rate for active programmes (excluding new and discontinued in 2013-14)</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>20% Simple Av. 21% Weighted Av.</b>	<b>22% Simple Av. 21% Weighted Av.</b>	

<b>% Reduction in non-progression rate from 2008-13 average to 2013-14</b>	<b>[(29-20)/29] 31%</b>	<b>[(28-21)/28] 25%</b>			<b>(b)</b>
<b>% Reduction in non-progression rate from 2008-13 average to 2014-15</b>	<b>[(29-22)/29] 24%</b>	<b>[(28-21)/28] 25%</b>			<b>(b)</b>
Higher Certificate in Business in Financial Services	42%	46%	N/A	N/A	
Higher Certificate in Business in Computing for Business	N/A	N/A	N/A	57%	
Bachelor of Business in Business Psychology	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Higher Certificate in Business in Social Media Marketing	N/A	N/A	39%	53%	
Bachelor of Business Real Estate (Valuation and Management)	45%	46%	N/A	N/A	
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Accounting and Law	34%	33%	N/A	N/A	
Higher Certificate in Business (Cavan outreach)	36%	45%	N/A	N/A	
<b>School average rate of non-progression</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>26% Simple Av. 24% Weighted Av.</b>	<b>26% Simple Av. 23% Weighted Av.</b>	
<b>% Reduction in non-progression rate from 2008-13</b>	<b>[(32-26)/32] 19%</b>	<b>[(30-24)/30] 20%</b>			<b>(a)</b>

average to 2013-14					
% Reduction in non-progression rate from 2008-13 average to 2014-15	$[(32-26)/32]$ 19%	$[(30-23)/30]$ 23%			(a)

Column 1 lists the programmes active in the Faculty of Business & Hospitality over the 7 year period under review. The first section shows those programmes active in both the 2008-13 comparison period and the 2013-14 and 2014-15 current periods. These facilitate direct comparison. The second section shows those programmes active in either but not both periods. The totals at the end are for all programmes combined.

Column 2 lists the average non-progression rates for each programme across the 5-year comparison period. Non-progression is calculated as the percentage of students registered on a first year programme on 31 March who are not registered on the second year of the same programme on 31 March the following year. The totals of these averages are simple average calculations also.

Column 3 is directly comparable to column 2 except that the non-progression rates are weighted by number of students. The totals of these averages are additionally weighted by student numbers.

Column 4 shows the non-progression rates for 2013-14, the year the subject initiative was undertaken. Simple and weighted average totals are calculated for comparison with the totals in columns 2 and 3 respectively. As there is only one year being considered here, weighted averages for each programme are not relevant.

Column 5 shows the non-progression rates for 2014-15, on the same basis as column 4.

The above table summarises the data informing this paper. The overall figures show a 19% reduction in the total school non-progression rate when the average 2009-2013 figure is compared with the 2013-14 figure (line (a) on table). This figure remains similar whether taken as a simple average of the percentages for each programme or weighted by student numbers. For 2014-15 the equivalent

figure for a simple average is the same at 19%, but the weighted average figure increases to 23%.

A more sophisticated analysis of the figures shows a 31% reduction in the rate of non-progression in 2013-14 in programmes common to both time periods (line (b) on table). This analysis excludes programmes which were new in 2014 as well as those which were not running in 2014 having been included at any point in the 2009-2013 figures. This figure drops to 25% when considered on a weighted average basis.

In 2014-15 the equivalent figures are 24% on a simple average, and 25% on a weighted average basis.

Hence, on a like for like basis, programme for programme, it is reasonable to conclude that for every three students dropping out of college in 2013-14 and 2014-15, one student has by this initiative avoided that fate.

This number very likely understates the true impact of the initiative, as the average entry points level of students on most programmes has declined over the period. It is impossible to quantify this counterfactual, but intuitively the baseline non-progression rate would have been expected to increase naturally.

## **Conclusions and future considerations**

Overall the "habit-forming" initiative was deemed successful in increasing levels of student engagement and improving progression rates. The model was further enhanced for the 2014-15 academic year to include additional supports for the first years with their first assignment. A further measure incorporated their second assignment being announced in advance of their first assignment deadline. Further revisions have been implemented during the current and ongoing programmatic review to ensure every student has an assignment at all times and every semester requires them to work from the outset.

From the perspective of the overall AIT Faculty of Business & Hospitality retention model a number of changes have already been implemented for the next academic year. The assignment given at induction will change from a SWOT analysis to a project relating to student views on the upcoming national budget.

The budget was selected due to the fact that the outlook and circumstances change annually thus requiring students to contribute original work.

Students who traditionally are not strong enough to attend university but attend institutions like AIT Faculty of Business & Hospitality might need to be given a more challenging introduction to their life as a third level student. Easing the student transition by getting students into the habit of working consistently is a vital ingredient that will contribute to their success.